

Stand up for Texas children today!

In confronting Texas's massive budget shortfall, lawmakers are slashing state-funded programs disproportionately affecting the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens- our children. Unable to vote or defend their needs before the legislature, children depend on us to advocate for services required to foster a prosperous future for our great state. Concerned constituents have raised their voices to demand that legislators rethink severe cuts in public education funding, but few have spoken out about the equally egregious cuts to essential healthcare services for children. As the House and Senate negotiate a final state budget – Texans must actively take a stand against shortsighted and fiscally irresponsible Medicaid and mental health funding cuts that will gut services that significantly affect the quality of life of our children and their ability to grow into healthy, productive adults.

Texas already leads the nation with the highest number of uninsured children (1.4 million or 23%), and health care workers witness children suffering from being uninsured or underinsured everyday. Recent examples include a young girl with diabetes who was admitted to the pediatric intensive care unit eight times within a single year because she kept running out of necessary but expensive medications. Another school-aged boy suffered from tooth pain for over six months and was unable attend class because of the severity of his physical distress; he was on the waiting list to be seen at a free dental clinic, but instead presented to the emergency room with a grave dental infection that had spread to his brain.

Medicaid, which covers routine preventative health services, vision, hearing, dental care, mental health visits, and hospitalizations, is the only feasible health insurance option for many Texas children, and 33% (2.3 million) are currently enrolled in the program. Medicaid is very cost-effective for children: more than half the nation's Medicaid enrollees are children, but they account for less than a quarter of its spending. The proposed cuts to Medicaid funding will directly lead to increased suffering and premature loss of life – more children will become uninsured, and children on Medicaid will be left with longer wait times and fewer options for care. Currently only 40% of Houston pediatricians accept Medicaid patients. With the proposed 10% cut in reimbursement rates, this number will drop further, forcing more Medicaid patients to rely on urgent care with significantly more expensive emergency room visits.

Claiming that cuts to Medicaid will save Texas money is disingenuous. Slashing Medicaid may temporarily decrease spending, but in the long run Texans will pay – big time. Texas currently receives federal matching funds for the Medicaid program- \$1.50 for every \$1.00 we spend. If the legislature votes to remove \$7.6 billion state dollars from our Medicaid program, we will lose \$11.4 billion in federal funds. Texans still pay federal taxes, so instead of getting some of our federal tax dollars back to help pay for Texas Medicaid, our tax dollars will fund other states' Medicaid programs. Furthermore, our children will still need healthcare – but they will be forced to make expensive emergency room visits instead of using preventative care, filling up costly hospital beds rather than using more cost-effective office visits. Texas taxpayers will still have to foot the bill; the burden simply shifts to the county or hospital district.

Perhaps the biggest cost, however, is societal as we raise children who are less healthy and therefore less well-educated and less productive in the work force. Uninsured children are more likely to miss school, less likely to graduate high school, and more likely to suffer from chronic diseases in adulthood. In 2005, the Perryman Group concluded that every \$1.00 in net cuts in state spending on Medicaid and CHIP increases local government costs and revenue losses by \$0.58 and results in \$4.80 in personal income losses, \$2.88 in consumer spending losses, and \$1.81 in retail sales losses.

Equally dangerous as the proposed cuts in Medicaid are the contemplated cuts in mental health funding for children. One in five children has a mental health diagnosis, which comprises almost 230,000 children in Harris County alone according to local nonprofit Children at Risk. Texas is already ranked 49th in funding for mental healthcare, and our children currently wait weeks to months for basic mental health services. This wait affects every aspect of development, from school performance to the ability to hold a job. Children who are unable to acquire timely care are frequently unable to obtain proper medications, which in many cases leads to poor impulse control, drug use, or crimes – increasing the financial burden on our juvenile justice system. Decreases in funding for our already stripped mental health system are directly correlated with increases in use of the justice system, which is unfortunately the largest provider of mental health services in the state of Texas currently. It is very inexpensive to treat a child in outpatient mental health clinics, but extremely expensive to provide treatment through jails, psychiatric hospitalizations, and residential treatment centers funded by the state. These children do not disappear because we cut funding for their mental health services- they are merely pushed into more expensive, permanent forms of care, with long term consequences for themselves and for Texas.

Texas must find a way to sustain public education, Medicaid, and mental health services. We must recognize that all Texas children require strong mental and physical health to fully reap the benefits of public education and successfully transition into productive adults. Cuts in funding to Medicaid and mental health services amount to nothing more than budget gimmickry- their full outlay is hidden from public view, but they will cost the state infinitely more than they will save. Our legislators have heard that Texans want to preserve public education. Now is the time to remind your representatives that Medicaid and mental health services are equally essential, and that the drastic cuts proposed for these programs would be the ultimate in fiscal irresponsibility. The House and Senate are finalizing the budget now - please contact your representative today: <http://www.legis.state.tx.us>.

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